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SUBJECT: Iraq: Italian-Sponsored Marsh Restoration Program

SUMMARY

1. (U) The Italian Ministry of Environment and Territory (MOE) has provided 2.1 million euros (1 euro 1.22 USD) through the Washington-based "Iraq Foundation" for a marshland recovery and water sanitation program called "New Eden." The Italian government will likely provide an additional 10 million euros in funding, according to an Italian expert working on the project. Corrado Clini, MOE Director General for International Affairs and Sustainable Development, was in Baghdad March 14-15 to promote the program, which currently involves two projects: the scientific monitoring of the re-flooding of the Abu Zareg marsh and a feasibility study on using flared gas from oil wells to power desalination plants. At present, New Eden represents the only environmentally focused Iraqi reconstruction project funded by the Italian Government. MOE funding will primarily support long-term planning, scientific monitoring, and feasibility studies associated with marsh recovery and water desalinization and sanitation. While the project fills an important environmental need, New Eden also follows the pattern of other Italian-sponsored efforts in Iraq by funding planning and surveys in the hopes of steering future contracting business to Italian firms. END SUMMARY.

Italian Money for Start-up, Research, and Planning

2. (U) The MOE and the Iraq Foundation, a Washington, DC-based NGO founded in 1991 by Iraqi exiles, started the New Eden project in July 2003. The MOE has pledged 2.1 million euros to date. Augusto Pretner, a hydraulic engineer, senior advisor to the MOE, and one of the leading Italian experts on New Eden, told Econoff the Ministry is likely to give an additional 10 million euros. The MOE and the Iraq Foundation describe New Eden as complementary to USAID work already underway to restore Iraqi marshlands. Iraq's Ministry of Environment, the Ministry of Water Resources (IMWR), and the Ministry of Public Works are partners in New Eden and, according to Pretner, the three Iraqi ministries have collectively pledged 100,000 euros to the program.

3. (U) According to a draft report Pretner provided to Econoff, MOE grants have funded twelve fact-finding expeditions to the marshlands between August 2003 and March 2004 and an initial survey/cost analysis of restoration for the entire marsh region. Azzam Alwash, an exiled Iraqi civil engineer who is a board member of both the Iraq Foundation and the Iraqi Forum for Democracy, took over as full-time project director in August 2003. The program also includes a team of six Italian and three American engineers and scientists, among others.

4. (U) From the initial large-scale survey, the MOE and the Iraq Foundation have chosen two smaller projects to implement immediately: scientific monitoring of the re-flooding of the Abu Zareg marsh and a feasibility study for using flared gas from oil wells to power desalinization plants.

Project One: Scientific Monitoring of Abu Zareg Marsh

5. (U) The MOE, the Iraq Foundation, and the IMWR, will conduct scientific monitoring of the re-flooding of the 200-square-kilometer Abu Zareg marsh, located in the southwest section of the central marshlands. The IMWR began re-flooding 60 square kilometres of the marsh in May 2003. Among other work, the Foundation will document conditions in the un-flooded portions prior to inundation; replant reeds; restock fish; and monitor water levels and water and soil quality as the re-flooding continues. The Foundation also plans to use Abu Zareg to train 20 Iraqi experts from the Iraqi Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Water

Resources to conduct scientific monitoring. The Iraq Foundation will also design dams and levies that, if constructed, could recreate the original flood cycle of the marsh.

30,000 Marsh Arabs Could Resettle in Abu Zareg

16. (U) The Foundation hopes Abu Zareg will provide lessons on restoration techniques that could be applied to the rehabilitation of Iraq's larger marshes. Restoration of the Abu Zareg would also allow 30,000 marsh Arabs to resume their previous way of life, if they so chose to return to the marshland. The Foundation estimates that implementing the Abu Zareg project will cost 3,850,000 euros, of which 3 million would go toward building the dams and levies. At present, the MOE is funding only the monitoring and design work and has no plans to fund these construction costs.

Project Two: Desalinization to Combat Brackish Water

17. (U) MOE funding will also support a feasibility study by the Iraq Foundation and the Iraqi Ministry of Public Works on harnessing natural gas from oil wells to power desalinization plants in the Nassiriyah-Basrah-Qurnah triangle in southwest Iraq, an area that also encompasses the Abu Zareg marsh. Presently, most water available to the triangle's 3.5 million inhabitants is brackish due to a combination of high natural salinity and poor water resource management. According to the draft report, the Iraq Foundation believes methane from oil wells, currently flared-off as an unwanted by-product, could provide enough cheap electricity to power a network of desalinization plants. (The same feasibility study will also explore the use of solar or wind energy to desalinate water in remote villages.) Current MOE grants will only cover the 550,000-euro cost of the feasibility study. The Foundation also hopes to build a 3-million-euro working desalinization pilot project, but this will require finding additional donors.

Another Proposal: Marshland "Master Plan"

18. (U) The New Eden project has also proposed a "master plan" study for country-wide marsh restoration. Pretner said the additional 10-million-euro Italian pledge, if finalized, would go toward this "master plan." The "master plan" envisions expanding the scientific monitoring of Abu Zareg to a much wider area of the marshlands, increasing training for Iraqi experts, and, possibly, constructing a laboratory for water and soil analysis. Pretner said the MOE may also help construct an early-warning system to alert the local population of dangerous floods. (The MOE funded development of a similar early-warning system for Italy.) The 10 million "master plan" will also include a comprehensive long-term planning study for marsh restoration and rehabilitation of water infrastructure in southwest Iraq.

19. (U) According to Pretner, the MOE is very pleased with the Iraq Foundation as a partner and views the close cooperation with the Iraqi ministries and Iraqi experts as a particular strength of New Eden.

COMMENT

10. (U) While this project helps address a critical environmental need for Iraqi, Italy hopes New Eden will generate contracts for water infrastructure, a field where Italian firms believe they are particularly competitive. In this sense, New Eden is similar to the Iraqi Transport Master Plan, another planning initiative partially funded by the Italian Government, with its goal of steering contracts to Italian companies. END COMMENT.

12. (U) Post would be happy to share documents related to the New Eden project. Contact Econoff Gregory May at maygc@state.gov.

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